AND TIMES HERALD

NOV 8 1967

Two Great Powers In Silent Warfare

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United Feature Syndicate

FIFTY YEARS AGO America's Ambassador to Russia was a stouthearted St. Louis banker named David R. Francis. His cynical colleagues in the diplomat corps said his most conspicuous distinction was that he took with him wherever he went, including his box at the opera in St. Petersburg, a traveling spittoon. It was a very special spittoon with a foot pedal that, when pressed, opened the top for proper use.

Returning home in 1919 after a considerable stay in London, Francis said in an interview that he gave Bolshevism only a few weeks or months before the Russian people, with their patriotism and good sense, would rise and wipe it out. He told the reporters that Leon Trotsky had tried to scare him but, being a Missourian by adoption and a Kentuckian by birth, he didn't scare worth a cent.

That was America's age of innocence which went on for an unconscionable time. On this, the 50th anniversary of the Soviet Revolution, the contrast with those days of America's innocent isolation could hardly be sharper.

DESPITE diplomatic amenities and solemn declarations of the desire for coexistence, the two giants face each other across a great divide of hostility and suspicion. In the nuclear arms race and in the back-alley war of espionage and subversion Americans and Russians on each side of the divide are engaged in platoons and whole divisions in silent and yet nonetheless lethal warfare.

In the headlines the back-alley war often gets a bigger play than the infinitely more serious contest over missiles and antimissiles. Symptomatic of the tension was Moscow's reaction to Svetlana Alliluyeva's decision to seek asylum in the United States and publish her memoirs here. The Kremlin saw this as a plot engineered by the CIA to bring about the defection of Stalin's daughter, with the timing intended to cause the utmost embarrassment during the anniversary celebration.

So far as can be determined the CIA had nothing to do with Svetlana's wandering into the American Embassy in New Delhi requesting to be allowed to come to this country. The thrust of her often-confused and melancholy memoir was not intentionally anti-Soviet. It did reveal how completely the life of the top rulers was divorced from that of the common people, and this revelation cannot have been a happy one for a society based on the theory of socialist equality.

In the game of one-upmanship in defectors the Soviets were bound to come up with a counter. They have produced a small fish named John Smith, who is now writing his memoirs for the weekly Literary Gazette. Two installments have appeared without demolishing the CIA.

The Soviets spend at least three to four times as much as the United States on the spy business, David Wise and Thomas Ross say in their forthcoming book, "The Espionage Establishment." It is a murky, obsessive world in which little fish like John Smith get hooked as well as far bigger fish. One of the biggest fish in recent years—some would say since the end of World War II—is Yevgeny Yevgenyvich Runge, who is now in the Washington area under intensive interrogation by the CIA.

RUNGE, who defected in West Berlin with his family, forwarded thousands of secret documents providing vital information on NATO out of Bonn to the Soviet Union. The damage is still under assessment. As invariably happens when a big fish swims into the net, little fish are betrayed. In Bonn the shock wave of Runge's defection is still reverberating.

The back-alley war is inseparably entwined with the nuclear arms race. The CIA's highest priority is to determine the extent of the antiballistic missile system being installed around Moscow and several other areas. It is not hard to imagine the hundreds, even thousands, of agents and subagents at work on this assignment in every corner of the world. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's announcement that the Soviets are almost certainly developing an orbital nuclear bomb was based on a mosaic of intelligence reports like the pieces in a gigantic jig-saw puzzle.

Only a reckless prophet would venture to say what the state of relations between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. will be on the hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. David Francis, observing that unruly mob before the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, could never have dreamed of today's confrontation. In 1967 the enigma is as dark and shrouded as in 1917.